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AUTHOR Uhlenberg, Don; Holt, Ladd
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ABSTRACT

Personal interviews were conducted with 138 elementary education majors at the completion of one of the two required foundation courses which include an early field experience in the teacher education program at the University of Utah. Questions asked concerned the students' perceptions of (a) the role of the elementary school classroom teacher, (b) their feelings of adequacy in performing that role, and (c) the value of their university courses in helping them prepare for that role. In general, it was found that students perceived the role realistically in terms of what they observed, had serious concerns regarding their ability to function adequately in the role as they saw it, and placed greater faith in experience than in the college classroom for gaining the competencies necessary for alleviating these concerns. (Author/PB)

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The Influence of an Early Field Experience on Student Attitudes in a Traditional Program of Teacher Education

Don Uhlenberg

and

Ladd Holt

University of Utah

131 MILTON BENNION HALL

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been an increased effort on the part of teacher training institutions to provide education students with more exposure to public school classrooms and classroom teaching. Reacting to criticism from virtually all quarters of the education field on grounds of "ivory towerism" and aloofness from the realities of public school teaching, field experiences have become a more integral part of teacher training programs.

Some colleges and universities have instituted completely new approaches in which the field experience serves as an inquiry base for further investigation and study in the process of becoming a teacher. Traditional programs, composed of a series of required courses, however, have adopted field experience as an opportunity to give meaning and relevancy to the lectures, readings, discussions and other more academic activities found in college classrooms. Field experience from this point of view, is seen as an opportunity to bring theory and practice together. The expectations are that through live contact with elementary school classrooms, education students will acquire a greater degree of insight into the problems of teaching which in turn will provide the students with a higher degree of concern, commitment and motivation toward the content of the university course of which the field experience is a part.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effects of an

early field experience on the attitudes of a group of elementary education majors in the early stages of a traditional teacher education program at the University of Utah regarding their:

1. perceptions of the role of the classroom teacher,
2. perceptions of their own capabilities and competencies as future teachers,
3. fears and concerns about becoming teachers,
4. perceptions of the relationship of their experiences in the college classroom to the above.

The program for elementary school teaching majors at the University of Utah is a traditional one consisting of a series of required courses broadly categorized as foundation courses (school and society, child development, and elementary school curriculum); methods courses (reading, language arts, mathematics, science and social studies); and student teaching. In the foundation area, two courses (child development and elementary school curriculum) incorporate a field experience component in which the students are placed in elementary school classrooms to serve as aides 4 to 8 hours per week for the duration of the quarter. As aides, students perform a variety of tasks ranging from tutoring to creating an interest center to making bulletin boards. No attempt is made to prescribe the exact experiences of the students but they are encouraged to become as much a part of the classroom as possible and to engage in as many teaching functions as the circumstances permit. They are also encouraged to study children's social and academic behavior, teacher-pupil relation-

ships, teaching methods and style, materials, curriculum patterns, learning experiences and alternatives, and in general, anything that would give them insight into the role of teaching.

PROCEDURE

For a period of one school year (3 academic quarters) the authors conducted personal interviews with 138 elementary education majors at the completion of one of the two foundation courses (child development or elementary school curriculum) which include a field experience as part of the course requirements.

During each interview, the students were encouraged to respond freely to questions and to volunteer any feelings or thoughts which might reveal useful data concerning their field experiences. After the interview, student responses were summarized and recorded on note cards which were then used at the end of the year to generalize the findings.

The first questions asked were designed to help the students discuss the role of the teacher as they saw it. With inquiries such as "What was it like in the classroom?", "What were your duties and responsibilities?", and "What do teachers do all day?", they were encouraged to talk about themselves, the children, the teacher, and the experiences they had in the classroom. Each student was then asked whether the role, as he perceived it, was a proper one for teachers in an elementary school classroom. The student was also asked whether the experience had altered his views on teaching or had changed any plans about becoming a teacher.

To assess the student's perceptions of his own capabilities and competencies, the following hypothetical situation was posed: "Suppose you were offered the teacher's job in the classroom in which you were an aide, and it could be arranged for you to graduate and become certificated with no further course work, would you take the job?" If the student answered negatively, he was asked to state why he would not. Those who responded in the positive were asked to state how they thought they would do in the job.

An attempt was then made to solicit responses regarding the student's fears and concerns as he considered the prospects of assuming the duties of a classroom teacher, whether it be in the hypothetical situation as stated above or in the more realistic one of waiting until after graduation.

Finally, the student was asked what he thought would best alleviate these fears and concerns and provide the confidence and competence to be a good teacher. Further questioning centered around the student's perceptions of the value of his academic experiences in the program as they relate to his becoming a teacher.

RESULTS

Students described the role of the teacher primarily in terms of the tasks she is expected to perform rather than in terms of learning goals or objectives. They saw the job of teaching as one in which the teacher is expected to carry out prescribed text and workbook programs

and to cover the content of an enforced curriculum in a given period of time. They saw teaching as a lot of other things as well: collecting lunch money, taking attendance, disciplining students, ordering supplies, and other miscellaneous forms of supervision and clerical work.

Only 12 students seriously questioned the appropriateness of the role of the teacher and of those, most were not certain just how it could be different under the circumstances. The majority saw the role simply as that which teachers are expected to carry out.

Most of the students said the experience was rewarding and that they were looking forward to teaching. Some thought their experiences were not too valuable because the teacher did not present a good model . Even these students were not discouraged about teaching, however. A few seemed uncertain about continuing their pursuit of a teaching career, having either come to see themselves as not being able to handle the difficulty of maintaining discipline in class or simply as being incompatible with the role as they perceived it.

Response to the hypothetical question of taking the job of the teacher in the class in which they were an aide was positive for about 80% of the students. Not only did they indicate a willingness to take the job, but most felt they could do about as well as the teacher with whom they worked as an aide. Some were even confident they could do better. Of those who said they probably wouldn't take the job, most stated that the reason was not feelings of inadequacy, but just that they wanted to finish college. Only a few thought they were not ready

to assume the duties of a classroom because they had not completed their teacher training program.

All students indicated some degree of apprehension at the prospect of beginning teaching, their greatest concern being that of maintaining control and order although some expressed fears as to whether the children would like them, whether they would be happy in teaching, and in general, whether they would perform adequately in the role.

When students were asked "What would best alleviate these fears and concerns you have about teaching?"they were nearly unanimous in responding with phrases such as "More experience", "Just more time in teaching", and "A few years on the job". This was especially true for those who said they would take the teachers job if offered them, but even those who said they wouldn't expressed conviction that one doesn't learn to teach except by doing it. Only a handful (5 or 6) stated that they hoped their education courses would be helpful in this regard.

Activities other than being an aide which were considered of value to the students were classroom observations, student tutoring, teaching files, collecting materials, interviewing classroom teachers, and some books which contained practical ideas for teaching. No one mentioned University classroom lectures, discussions, presentations, papers written or textbook assignments.

CONCLUSIONS

Student perceptions of the teacher's role in the elementary school as a result of the early field experience, were realistic, clear and

quite accurate in terms of what teachers actually do in classrooms across the country. Furthermore, they agreed with the perceptions of classroom teachers reported in previous research in which the role is primarily one of instructing, keeping order, and contributing to a smoothly run operation.[1,2] This seems to be an acceptable role to most students as they view the school in the context of our society.

Students who enter the teaching field have a fairly good idea of what teaching is all about, having spent a number of years themselves in school as students. They also tend to accept the role for what it is, as long as it fits their life goals and objectives. Most likely these students enter the teaching field expecting to adapt and conform to the role, not change it. The early field experience merely confirms and supports their prior perceptions of the teaching role with perhaps greater focus and clarity as it relates to the specific tasks of teaching. For these students, being a good teacher does not mean creating a new role for teaching but learning to perform well in the role. Most students believe they have the proper personality makeup, attitudes and motives to be good teachers and are eager to get on with it.

That most students indicated a desire to begin teaching without further course work is perhaps partly a function of an acute shortage of teaching jobs, but more likely is due to the students' belief that they are about as ready to begin teaching at the start of their teacher training as they will be when they finish.

Beginning education students seem to view successful teaching as a

combination of two factors. The first is a certain set of personality characteristics that they associate with teachers they have observed and consider to be good teachers. These include patience, enthusiasm, warmth, and a concern for the welfare of children. Furthermore, students appear confident that they possess these same kind of characteristics or at least have the potential for developing them. The second factor is time. They believe strongly that only through experience does one learn those methods, techniques, and approaches that eventually help them develop as good teachers. From the students' point of view, neither the possession of the personality characteristics nor job experience has anything to do with their university courses. Small wonder then that so many students come to see their teacher training programs as being irrelevant and unhelpful.

The early field experience for students in this study did not serve to make the more idealistic and academic coursework in the methods courses more meaningful and relevant as was expected. In fact, the opposite seemed to occur. Through an exposure to classroom teaching, the students acquired and maintained an accurate and realistic view of what teaching is like, what constitutes success on the job and what they needed to function well in that role. With these realistic expectations, students were attracted even less to the more academic pursuits of the college classroom which emphasizes the way teaching ought to be rather than the way it is.

One might conclude that universities which continue to approach teacher education from a more theoretical and academic point of view

would be better off (from the professors' standpoint) not to offer any field experience at all. Shielded from the realities of public school teaching, at least some, if not a good many, of the students are apt to be caught up in the idealism of academia and proceed through their program in the study of teaching in ways similar to those of the professor, providing a rewarding and enjoyable experience to both. The problem, of course, occurs when the student encounters student teaching and discovers that his education courses simply have not prepared him to cope with the demands of classroom teaching. For these students the initial contact with teaching is likely to result in what Metzner and Nelson refer to as "reality shock"[3] or what Reitman calls "teacher role strain".[4] The consequences are often bitterness and resentment on the part of the student toward the university for not having prepared him adequately.

The dilemma is a very real and serious one for colleges and universities. If teacher training institutions opt to continue to operate in a traditional, academic, and idealistic manner, they assume great risk, for dissatisfaction among public school personnel is growing, manifesting itself in increased challenges on a number of fronts to the university's traditional control over undergraduate and graduate teacher education.

Colleges and universities could choose to approach the training of teachers from a more vocational standpoint with more emphasis on helping students to adapt and adjust to the role of teaching through the learning of those skills and competencies required to fulfill that role.

College professors, however, are loathe to merely indoctrinate students into a teaching role; particularly one which is unacceptable to them. Conversely, they have preferred to deal with teaching the way it might be, hoping that students will then transform their classrooms into ones representing the more ideal models of teaching and learning they profess. This transformation simply hasn't occurred.

The most promising alternative seems to be one in which an attempt is made to both help the student survive the pressures and requirements of the teaching role and at the same time change it into a role which reflects the modern writings and research findings of contemporary thought in public schooling. This is certainly a Herculean task by any standards but one considered to be feasible by many educators in teacher training institutions and many programs are underway which are attempting to accomplish this aim. Through extensive research and experimentation, we may soon begin to see whether teacher education programs can meet with any degrees of success. One thing seems certain, however, that relevant teacher training will not be achieved through the traditional coursework approach - with or without field experience.

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